

**LEADING:**

# A Culture of Engagement

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By Dominique Smith

It's hard to learn if you're not engaged. It really is that simple. When students disengage, they are way less likely to learn. The same holds true for teachers in professional learning situations, by the way. That's why there are so many books, articles, and professional development offerings focused on this topic. Most of these resources focus on behavioral engagement and include things such as looking at the teacher or writing things down. But we know that there are students who can look out a window and still pay attention to the content. Of course, if they're sleeping in class they cannot behaviorally engage. Thus, we think that behavioral engagement is easier to see but may not provide a complete picture of whether or not a student is really engaged.

Thus, we decided to write a book about the design of engaging learning opportunities: *Engagement by Design*. In *Engagement by Design*, we focused on cognitive and emotional engagement, not just cognitive engagement. In doing so, we had to think about inviting classrooms, relationships, teacher clarity, challenging tasks.

As part of our learning related to all three types of engagement (behavioral, cognitive, and emotional), we encountered the work of William Purkey, who developed the idea of invitational teaching (e.g., Purkey and Novak, 1996). This idea suggests that there are four types of teachers based on how intentional (or not) and how inviting (or not) they are. When you think about it, someone can be very intentional and very inviting. But people can also be the opposite: not intentional and not inviting. And then there are the two in the middle, meaning people who are intentional but not inviting or not intentional but inviting. The characteristics of each of these types of teachers are described below (Fisher, Frey, Quaglia, Smith, and Lande, 2017, p. 8):

- Unintentionally inviting teachers
  - Are eager but unreflective
  - Are energetic but rigid when facing problems
  - Are unaware of what works in their practice and why
  - Have fewer means to responding when student learning is resistant to their usual methods
- Unintentionally uninviting teachers
  - Distance themselves from students
  - Have low expectations
  - Don't feel effective and blame students for shortcomings
  - Fail to notice student learning or struggle
  - Offer little feedback to learners
- Intentionally uninviting teachers
  - Are judgmental and belittling
  - Display little care or regard
  - Are uninterested in the lives and feelings of students
  - Isolate themselves from school life
  - Seek power over students

- Intentionally inviting teachers
  - Are consistent and steady with students
  - Notice learning and struggle
  - Respond regularly with feedback
  - Seek to build, maintain, and repair relationships



As leaders, we probably have all four of these types of teachers on campus and they need different things to grow. When we recognize these types of teachers, we can create learning plans, evaluations, coaching, and professional development to help grow these individuals. For me, it starts with setting clear expectations.

When I encountered classrooms with lower than expected levels of engagement, I had to ask myself if I had described, modeled, and explained in detail what the vision and expectations are for engagement in our school. Some teachers have no understanding of what the school or leaders want, so they create something that they have experienced or what they were taught when they went to school. The majority of the times, that means a teacher creates a classroom full of rules, straight row seating, and library voice atmosphere. When I asked teachers why they did this, the answer was remarkably consistent. They did so because they were fearful that if an administrator walked in and heard students talking, they would be perceived as a poor teacher who did not have “control” of the classroom and they would receive feedback that

the students are not engaged in the class. One teacher even told me, “My last principal expected a quiet and orderly classroom” so I make sure it’s like that for when you come in.

As I reflected on this, I wondered if I had made my, and our school, expectations clear. I am looking for students “engaged” in the content. I don’t mind if all students are talking. If they are so excited to share their thinking about that content, they’re engaged. It also probably means that they love the content and they love the teacher delivering the content. Over time, I have come to realize that I had to identify my expectations, or my nonnegotiables, when it comes to engagement. Of course, that means that I have to share my expectations and support people to reach them. For me, these are things I care about:

- No straight row seating; we seek collaborative space
- No teacher’s desk; we don’t want teachers trapped or hidden
- Healthy, growth-producing relationships are a must
- Our students should know the what, why, and how of every lesson
- The tasks are rigorous and relevant

#### SEATING

Just because students are sitting in rows and looking at the teacher does not mean that they are engaged. If students are sitting up and looking forward, they might be engaged or they might be compliant (and on vacation in their minds). I encourage teachers to build spaces in their room where students can have the option to communicate with others. I believe classroom discussion is one of the best avenues for learning and that is backed up with Hattie’s research that tells us that classroom discussion has a positive effect (.82) on student learning. When students share their thinking, they can learn from each other and clarify their own understandings.

#### HATTIE’S RESEARCH

So, we need to create spaces that allow and encourage collaboration and conversation. I encourage teachers

to move tables around so that they can design comfortable and flexible seating. I also encourage them to change the lighting in the room and to allow the classroom to have noise. In some classrooms, teachers have created a noise meter, a visual display that shows the expected volume at the time. For example, it might go from “silent” to “concert.” When I asked the teacher about the highest level, she said, “Yeah, we did that once at the beginning of the year to see how it sounded and we agreed that was never appropriate for the classroom.” This teacher uses the noise meter to help students monitor their volume. As she added, “If the volume isn’t matched to the meter, I just walk over to it and point as a reminder and it changes right away.”

Given the importance of classroom discussion as a facilitator of engagement, we have accepted the challenge that 50 percent of our learning will occur in some type of collaboration. We follow Doug Fisher and Nancy Frey’s framework of the Gradual Release of Responsibility. This framework provides a format for teachers to follow to allow for true engagement. There are four parts to the model that can occur in any order including:

- **Focused instruction.** For the teacher that is the “I do it” when they model and explain.
- **Guided instruction.** This is the “We do it” part when the teacher is guiding students’ thinking with questions, prompts, and cues.
- **Collaborative learning.** This “You do it together” practice allows the time for students to collaborate and to share their thinking in groups. This is why our seating is important; if we do not have seating that offers collaboration, we end up losing more time in transitions rather than learning.
- **Independent learning.** In the “You do it alone” stage students practice and apply what they have learned.

#### TEACHER’S DESK

How engaged are your students? Do your teachers know which students

are or are not engaged? Are they making their judgment behind a desk or with students? Teachers are models. Students watch their teachers very closely. When walking classrooms, I sometimes notice that teachers model nonengagement. In those classrooms, teachers tend to do some direct teaching and then release their students to go and do independent work. As that release happens, some teachers then drift away to their computer at their desk and lose all connections with their students. Hands are shooting up and students are moving around and the teacher is not engaged in the class but rather their device. A culture of engagement has to be modeled. That starts with the leaders. You have to ask yourself if you are modeling engagement. Then, you have to help teachers model for students before they have engagement expectations from their students.

Of course, leaders have to model engagement first. For example, we should be present in any professional development offered to our teachers. Our schedules are slam packed but we cannot be nose deep in our devices while others are engaged and working. This sends a strong message that we are too busy for what is happening and whatever else we are doing is more important. We should model what it looks like to be a good listener and what it looks like to be engaged. This example will help teachers understand that while they are working with their students, they have to be engaged with the content as well as engaged with the students. As students see their teachers engaged with them, they are more likely to strive to be more engaged.

As a leader, I took a risk and pushed an idea that I believed could contribute to the culture of engagement. I decided that we would remove all teachers’ desks from the building. Not as punishment, not a top-down approach, but rather a collective approach to help us move past unnecessary roadblocks. Each teacher had their desk removed and received a two- to four-drawer filing cabinet. They also received a

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podium to place their computer on for projection. The feedback was amazing. Teachers said students saw a difference and felt the difference. When teachers released students to work, instead of falling into the depths of a teacher desk, they were right next to students at their desks being engaged in their learning.

#### RELATIONSHIPS

Student-teacher relationships are a driving force in anything we do in education. If we want discipline to decrease, we need relationships. If we want our attendance to improve, we need relationships. And if we want students to be engaged in their learning, we need relationships. Relationships once again have to be modeled. We have to model a safe environment where students believe that they can be vulnerable as well as feel safe in asking any question. Some teachers struggle with this. They build a wall. They build a deep boundary so that students will never be too close. They establish a dichotomy: I am the teacher and you are the student and that is it. Teachers do this to our students because they experience it daily; they are the teacher and you are the leader. No need or time for a relationship. Are you thinking about the relationships you have with teachers and those that need to be repaired? Teachers need you, they want to trust you, and they want to ask questions and celebrate successes with you. As we create a more welcoming relationship from leader to teacher, we will create more engagement within our staff. We will have more participation in meetings and more connections throughout the school. This gesture of change can then become a norm, and

teachers will then seek relationships with students. A relationship ties a student to you, as well as ties them back to the content, and in *Engagement by Design* that's what we call true engagement.

CLARITY

I take great pride when I visit classrooms at our school and see that students clearly know what they are learning, why they are learning, and when they are successful. I reflect back to myself as a student in high school and I remember multiple classes when I couldn't answer any of those questions. I had no idea what I was supposed to be learning, much less why it would be important. Success was just a grade in a class. As a result, I was automatically not engaged in the content my teacher was delivering. But I don't think that was the teacher's fault. They had the things posted on the walls for their walk-throughs and delivered content from bell to bell, most of the time not even checking if we knew what was going on.

So, as I walk my classroom, I am thankful to see questions that our teachers reference through their lesson. They have posted learning intentions (what am I learning and why am I learning this) and then they have posted success criteria (how do you know you learned it) that tells students, by the end of the day and/or the end of the lesson, you will be successful if you have completed, learned, and understood *x*, *y* or *z*. An easy way to grab a student's attention as they walk into class is to ensure that they know what the class is about and then know how to be successful that day. This cannot happen without the guidance of a leader. Each day I walk our building, asking students at random the what, why, and how questions. Then on Fridays, during our professional development sessions, I list the percentage numbers of students who could answer those questions and then give some time for wonderings and action steps. This has allowed me to hold staff accountable but also give and support them with a new tool.

RIGOR, TASKS, AND RELEVANCE

The last area related to engagement focuses on the tasks students are asked to complete. When students have a strong relationship with the teacher and they know what they are learning, they are much more likely to accept the challenge of learning. That allows teachers to raise the rigor and create challenging tasks. We know that students want more challenge in their learning. What they don't want is boring tasks that require little thinking but a lot of time. I don't think that students will take a risk and agree to the struggle of learning without strong relationships and a clear understanding of what they are learning. They are necessary conditions, but not enough. The task has to be complex and relevant. When I visit classrooms, I take a look at the tasks students are asked to complete, and I make a note about the expectations the teacher has and how the students are responding. Over time, we've been able to considerably increase the expectations we have for students. And it works. They like school better and learn more.

SUMMARY

If you picked up this article thinking that there were gimmicks or tricks to get students to engage, I think I have failed you. What I have learned about student engagement is that it's more than what meets the eye: behavioral. And to really get students to engage, we have to help teachers establish strong, healthy, growth-producing relationships. And we have to increase the clarity of the learning. In doing so, we

can increase rigor and invite students into the complex world of learning. As the leader, you are critical. You should model the way and provide feedback for teachers so that they can increase their impact through engagement.

Fisher, D., Frey, N., Quaglia, R. J., Smith, D., and Lande, L. L. (2017). *Engagement by Design: Creating Learning Environments Where Students Thrive*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Purkey, W. W., and Novak, J. M. (1996). *Inviting School Success: A Self-concept Approach to Teaching, Learning, and Democratic Practice* (3rd ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

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